U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service January 2012

Field Notes

News from the Alabama Ecological Services Field Office

Partners for Fish and Wildlife: A Recipe for Success in Shades Creek

The value of clean water in Alabama is priceless. Not only is it essential for human consumption. It's also necessary for recreation, outdoor activity, and wildlife. So when water quality is threatened, Alabamians take action. Just ask folks who live near Shades Creek.

Shades Creek is a major tributary to the Cahaba River, and flows through six major urban areas: Irondale, Mountain Brook, Birmingham, Homewood, Hoover, and Bessemer. In the past, sewage overflows, construction, and stream bank erosion have had negative effects on water quality. But the Creek was also facing another problem: Abandoned rail cars – a relic of the area's coal mining past were littering the waterway causing ecological degradation and creating a safety hazard for recreationists. As a result, the Friends of Shades Creek, a local non-profit, contacted the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for help. Upon his investigation, Service biologist Eric Spadgenske learned the creek contained three threatened and endangered species: the round rocksnail, goldline darter, and Cahaba shiner.

"The rail cars were continually degrading habitat by deflecting the flow and causing a "fire nozzle" effect that was scouring the downstream shoal," explained Spadgenske. "The rail cars were also thought to be a fish passage barrier."

Through the Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, Spadgenske was able to assist in removing the cars out of Shades Creek, helping to restore the natural flow of the water and restoring the habitat for several imperiled aquatic species. The massive project took years of planning, and biologists gathered input from more than ten agencies and non-governmental partners.

Above and below: conservationists worked tirelessly to remove traces of rail cars from Shades Creek, USFWS.

The goldline darter is a threatened species found in Shades Creek, USFWS.

The next step will be measuring the success of the project through surveys and data collection by several contributing partners. Conservationists anticipate a positive outcome for both the stakeholders and the aquatic life, proving that partnerships can produce amazing results. In summary, Spadgenske said, "Partnerships really are the backbone of what we do, and this project is no exception."

How Can You Help Imperiled Species?

Keeping Them Off the Endangered Species List is a Good Start. Candidate Conservation Agreements May Help Do the Trick.

When a critter is close to extinction, conservationists with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service take protective measures to restore the species. Adding imperiled wildlife to the Endangered Species List is the last line of defense for the animal. But the list of troubled plants, fish and animals is growing. Currently, the Service is working on a backlog of 435 species in the Southeast Region that may need protection under the Endangered Species Act. In other words, they are "candidates" for listing. While biologists collect data on these species, the Service is taking proactive measures to help boost other populations…and help keep them off the list.

In order to stop these candidates species from federal listing, more field offices are taking advantage of Candidate Conservation Agreements (CCAs), and Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances (CCAAs). These are formal conservation agreements between the Service, Federal agencies, States, Tribes and non-governmental organizations who **voluntarily** commit to implement specific actions designed to remove or reduce threats to species. These agreements would cover Federal and non-Federal land, as well as private land.

The spring pygmy sunfish is a candidate species in Alabama, Outdoor Alabama.

The Endangered Species Act is designed to help those species desperate to survive. With the help of CCAs and CCAA's, hopefully candidate species won't have to reach the brink of extinction. Together, the partners can take proactive steps to enhance fish, wildlife and their habitats. If you have any questions about these agreements, email Alabama@fws.gov.

Red-cockaded Woodpecker Recovery on a Private Quail Plantation in Alabama

by Eric Spadgenske

Volunteers come together for the red-cockaded woodpecker, Aubrey M. Heupel.

On November 13-15, 2011 a tireless group of volunteer biologists gathered at Enon and Sehoy Plantations in southeast Alabama for yet another installment of the annual Red-cockaded Woodpecker (RCW) artificial cavity provisioning event, affectionately referred to as the "Insert Blitz". Once again, the bulk of the crew was made up of dedicated and highly skilled Forest Service personnel, from the National Forests of Alabama. The 13-member crew also included staff from Enon and Sehoy Plantations, two private wildlife management consultants, and personnel from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Alabama Ecological Services Field Office.

The Forest Service Crew installed almost three dozen artificial cavities. These cavities will secure roosting and nesting cover for the resident population of RCWs, as well as provide opportunities for strategic population expansion.

Attracting biologists to Enon and Sehoy is not difficult. In addition to the genuine southern hospitality extended by the owners, Enon and Sehoy hold unique biological wonders. These properties, located about midway between Tuskegee National Forest and Fort Benning, consist of over 27,000 contiguous acres of expertly-managed bobwhite quail habitat – which just happens to be some of the finest red-cockaded woodpecker habitat in the Southeast.

The conservation ethic and vision of Campbell Lanier, III, Owner of Enon and Sehoy Plantations is paramount to the success of an RCW recovery strategy that began almost ten years ago. Since 2006, the population of RCWs on Enon and Sehoy has increased from a low of three active clusters to over 20 family groups today. This success has resulted from the hard work and dedication of many people over the past several years. Notably, the support of the National Forests of Alabama for their amazing efforts during the annual insert blitzes; the Department of Defense for their expert and unheralded contribution of more than two dozen juvenile RCWs for translocation to Enon and Sehoy; Mark Bailey of Conservation Southeast, Inc. for his consistent leadership in on-the-ground implementation of both population monitoring and habitat management; and many, many others.

Alabama Field Office Announces Northern Gulf Coastal Program

The Alabama Field Office is proud to announce a new program that will help to better protect our coastal critters and their habitats. The Northern Gulf Coastal Program was founded in April 2011. It's the 24th Coastal Program Office in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The Northern Gulf Coastal Program works with other agencies and communities in conserving trust resources, including migratory birds, endangered species, certain marine mammals, fish, wetlands, marshes, sea grasses, longleaf pine, uplands, prairies, aquatic vegetation, and oyster beds.

If you are involved in a conservation group and may need assistance meeting your goals, call our Northern Gulf Coastal Coordinator Patric Harper. His number is 228/475 0765. His email is patric_harper@fws.gov

Earlier this year, the NGCP took part in an oyster reef restoration project, USFWS.

Biologists Survey for Imperiled Mussels

By Jennifer Pritchett

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has proposed eight freshwater mussels to be listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The listing package includes the Alabama pearlshell, Southern sandshell, round ebonyshell, Choctaw bean, Southern kidneyshell, tapered pigtoe, narrow pigtoe, and the fuzzy pigtoe.

Surveys are conducted to gather information on the distribution and population status of mussels. One of these mussels, the Alabama pearlshell, needs to be sampled at a particular time of year. During the summer months when water temperatures rise and stream flows decrease, the Alabama pearlshell burrows into the substrate. Once winter hits, this mussel species is cued to begin spawning and individuals rise out of the substrate to be partially exposed to the water. When the mussel is exposed, biologists are able to see the mussel through view buckets.

All three photos USFWS.

Meet the Staff: Drew Rollman

Cartographer Drew Rollman takes a break from map-making and helps sample a Gulf sturgeon, USFWS.

What is your role at the Alabama Field Office?

I am the Geographic Information Systems (GIS) specialist in the office with the official title of Cartographer. I collect, store, and manage all of the office spatial data.

I work closely with all office biologists to provide them with map products they need for field projects. I also assist them with spatial analysis. In addition, I am working on landscape level modeling using different GIS products to help identify statewide species habitats and potential problems. This is important so biologists can get more bang for their buck when it comes to conservation.

How does GIS and mapping fit into conservation?

I have a hard time picturing conservation without using GIS and mapping. Geographic Information Systems gives you the ability to pull together so many spatial datasets and analyze what is going on the landscape, whether it's encroachment from urban sprawl or wetland migration due to sea level rise. It also aids biologists in habitat description, delineation and monitoring.

Bringing all of this data into a map allows the biologist to see all of a species habitat patches, helping to identify similar areas on the landscape that could support the species. Biologists can also identify corridors the species needs to move between habitat patches. Geographic Information Systems includes a lot of different modeling capabilities that use statistics and spatial data help drive conservation work.

Where do you see the future of GIS in the USFWS?

When I started here in 2002, there were a few Atlases around the office with either crayon or magic marker dots in them, and that's how the staff identified species throughout the state. But the use of a product called ArcMap in the Southeast has changed the way we do things. Today, our staff has current information available to them on their computers, and can take Global Positioning System units to the field and update data in real time.

I truly believe there will be an increase in modeling and statistics used within the Alabama Field Office. Keeping up with the latest technology will not only help with office workload. It will also aid in species recovery.

Support Staff: We Couldn't Make it Without Them!

When you read stories about the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, you often hear about our dynamic biologists. Whether they are sampling for Alabama sturgeon, trapping beach mice, or tagging manatees in Mobile Bay, it only seems natural that our biologists get the glory.

But there are a group of staffers at the Alabama Field Office that play an integral role in keeping the office up and running. In fact, there wouldn't be an office without them. They are the support staff….administrators and Information Technology Specialists. These employees give biologists the tools they need to complete their work….. literally and figuratively.

Sonya Johnson is our newest administrative assistant in the Alabama Field Office, USFWS.

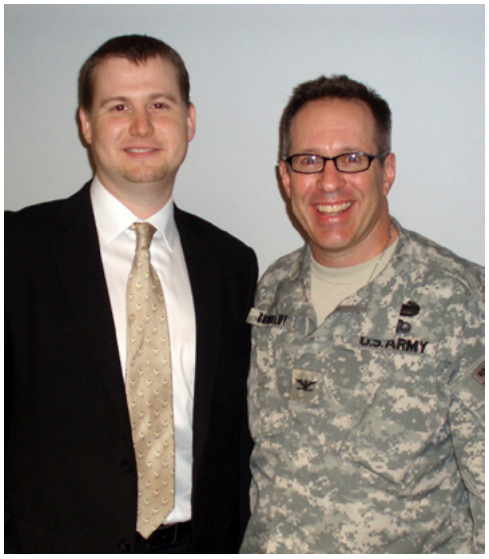
The newest member of our support staff is Sonya Johnson. She's the first person you see when you walk into the Alabama Field Office, and the person you'll most likely speak with when you call. Sonya tracks each project as it comes in the mail, and she keeps valuable records of all Service actions. If you need to know the status of a project, Sonya is your go-to gal.

Sonya isn't the only one running the show. Biologists would not be able to complete their work without computers. That's why IT Specialist Tracy Bush is so important. Whether it's keeping emails intact, installing a printer, or updating the latest software, Tracy plays a pivotal role in the Alabama Field Office.

Employees like Sonya and Tracy truly deliver the "Service" part of our agency. For that, we thank you!

Service Biologist Graduates from Leadership Development Program

Fish and Wildlife biologist Josh Rowell recently graduated from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Leadership Development Program. Rowell attended classes on public speaking, team-building, and other leadership skills. His class's final project was an analysis on the use of new media in promoting agency messages. Congratulations Josh!



Service Biologist Josh Rowell and Colonel Steven J. Roemhildt, USFWS.

Two Biologists Say Goodbye to Alabama Field Office

Biologists Darren Leblanc and Jodie Smithem recently left the Alabama Field Office to pursue other opportunities within the Service. Darren was the lead biologist for the Alabama Beach Mouse. Jodie was a recovery biologist, specializing in terrestrial species.

We will miss them, and we wish them the best of luck!

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